

**“To Boldly Go Where No Straight Person Has Gone Before?”: *The Left Hand of Darkness*
and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as Problematic Challenges to Gender and Sexuality**

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ABSTRACT

Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 Novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* and "The Outcast," a 1992 episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, have both been criticized for their representations of gender and sexuality essentially because they fail to remove fully the "traditional straitjackets" of the male-female binary and the heteronormativity they seek to challenge. A selection of this criticism is discussed, along with a close reading of each work. Despite different media, a difference in the degree of focus on gender, and the years separating them, the two works share striking similarities, making them worthy of comparison. This paper will reveal two shared features of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and "The Outcast" that undermine their stated or presumed aims: first, both works serve to reenforce a male-female gender binary, and second, while the use of androgynous characters has the potential to challenge heterosexual norms, both works reenforce such norms by gendering — specifically, feminizing — otherwise androgynous characters and conflating biological sex or gender identity with sexual orientation through romantic relationships with male protagonists.

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“To Boldly Go Where No Straight Person Has Gone Before?”: *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as Problematic Challenges to Gender and Sexuality

In her 1978 essay “New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction,” Pamela J. Annas discusses the use of androgyny as metaphor by female science fiction writers, which she contends began with Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (146). According to Annas:

Alternatives to sex role stereotyping are central to the utopian visions of feminist writers. [...] For the feminist writer, androgyny is a metaphor, more or less explicitly, which allows the writer to structure utopian visions that eliminate or transcend contradictions which she sees as crucial. (146)

That transcendence can prove difficult, as in *Left Hand* and in a 1992 episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* entitled “The Outcast.” As author and critic Joanna Russ puts it, “It’s the whole difficulty of science fiction, of genuine speculation: how to get away from traditional assumptions which are nothing more than traditional straitjackets” (191). In the context of both sex and gender, the traditional assumption is a male-female binary. Closely related is the assumption of heterosexuality. Androgyny can serve as a tool to transcend issues of both gender and sexual orientation because the two are, for better or worse, so inextricably linked in people’s minds. While androgyny is typically indicative of a utopia, as Annas states, the androgyny presented in science fiction does not necessarily lead to what might be considered utopian results and can actually reenforce conservative social constructions of gender and sexuality.

Annas provides several definitions of androgyny. This paper is concerned primarily with the one borrowed from Carolyn Heilbrun: “a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned” (cited in Annas 146). Science fiction can take any number of approaches to the presentation of androgyny. In the works I discuss, androgyny goes further than the social aspects of gender, extending to anatomy and biology. Annas writes:

[Alternatives to sex role stereotyping] range widely from visions of worlds which have entirely eliminated men and therefore sexual polarization, through

visions of worlds which are biologically androgynous, to visions of worlds in which male and female functions and roles simply are not sharply differentiated. (146)

Both *Left Hand* and “The Outcast” fit into Annas’ second sub-category of androgyny wherein a visitor or group of visitors arrive on a world where the inhabitants are, for the most part, biologically and socially androgynous.

In addition, both works have been criticized for their representations of gender and sexuality essentially because they fail to remove fully the “traditional straitjackets” of the male-female binary and the heteronormativity they seek to challenge. A selection of this criticism will be discussed below, along with a close reading of each work. Despite different media, a difference in the degree of focus on gender, and the years separating them, the two works share striking similarities, making them worthy of comparison. This paper will reveal two shared features of *Left Hand* and “The Outcast” that undermine their stated or presumed aims: first, both works serve to reenforce a male-female gender binary, and second, while the use of androgynous characters has the potential to challenge heterosexual norms, both works reenforce such norms by gendering — specifically, feminizing — otherwise androgynous characters and conflating biological sex or gender identity with sexual orientation through romantic relationships with male protagonists.

Left Hand and “The Outcast” share several common features and common problems. Both present an androgynous race in a “framework of racial/species displacement” (Kydd). That is, the Gethenians and J’naii are unfamiliar to the protagonists. Genly Ai is a visitor on Gethen just as the Enterprise crew are visiting the J’naii on their planet. No J’naii had appeared on *Star Trek* previously, and based on the episode’s dialogue, most of the crew are meeting them for the first time. Both works also include explicit, and strikingly similar, discussions of the differences between males and females. Both Le Guin and the producers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* had some clear goals in mind with their respective works but garnered significant negative criticism from contemporary commentators in spite of their efforts.

An important distinction between the two works is the relative centrality of the “gender issue.” Genly’s shortcomings in his perception of the Gethenians and his sexism toward women

are not the main discourse of *Left Hand*. The novel is a part of Le Guin's Hainish cycle, which consists of the tangentially linked stories of planets colonized by the Hainish, and tales of the Ekumen and its efforts to expand its reach across the known universe. Genly's mission on behalf of the Ekumen, the organization's moral status, and the growing political unrest on Gethen make up the primary plot of the novel. While their androgyny affects Genly's interactions with the Gethenians, there are other cultural differences that hinder Genly's understanding of the Gethenians, most notably shifgrethor — "prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen" (14). "The Outcast" and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a series are each part of a larger whole — the *Star Trek* franchise — but because the television series is episodic, the overarching plot of the series is not always affected by the events of a single episode. The plot device for bringing the Enterprise and the J'naii together is trivial and is resolved relatively early in the episode so that the episode can concentrate on the gender issue and the romance between Riker and Soren.

In *Left Hand*, the ethnologist Genly Ai visits Gethen, also known as Winter — a snow- and ice-covered planet inhabited by an androgynous race of humanoids — on behalf of the Ekumen — a league of planets working to persuade the Gethenians to accept an invitation to join their organization. The chapters narrated by Genly consist of his observations to be delivered to the Ekumen. Other chapters are Gethenian myths and histories, and diary entries written by Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, an exile and Genly's closest ally among the Gethenians.

Commentary on gender and sexuality is frequent in the novel, as Genly struggles to reconcile the idea of androgyny with his understanding of gender. Gethenians are androgynous for the majority of their lives. The exception is "kemmer" — a period of several days each month when they assume either male or female physical characteristics necessary for reproduction. Following kemmer, the partners revert to their androgynous state, barring pregnancy. So, while Gethenian reproduction requires a "male" and "female," all Gethenians are potentially male and female, and gender does not exist as a social construct on the planet; Gethenians, therefore, are not judged based on reproductive organs or other physical traits because they are, for the most part, all the same. Anatomically, they are both bisexual and

androgynous depending on whether they are in kemmer or somer; they have the potential to be physically male or female during any given kemmer and one Gethenian can both bear and sire children in a lifetime.

Discussion of sex and gender roles also prevails in “The Outcast,” as gendered and androgynous characters endeavour to understand how the others live. The crew of the Enterprise assist an androgynous race, the J’naii, in locating a missing shuttlecraft. In contrast to Gethenians, the J’naii have ostensibly evolved away from gender and are in a permanent state of physical androgyny, including during reproduction wherein both partners inseminate a fibrous husk. They are, by their nature, homosexual in that all J’naii are of the same sex. There are exceptions to the norm on each planet. On Gethen, some people remain in kemmer permanently while others are celibate, a state which can be induced through drugs. In “The Outcast” it is revealed that some J’naii still identify as male or female in spite of their species’ evolution. The physical manifestation of that identity, if any, is not explained.

Both stories focus on a relationship between a male protagonist and an individual member of an androgynous race. Genly is initially distrustful of Estraven, but his feelings change over time. He comes to recognize Estraven as an ally, particularly after Estraven rescues him from prison and the pair trek across the ice; his feelings change to those of friendship and, perhaps, romantic affection. The romance in “The Outcast” is more explicit. Enterprise commander William Riker becomes fast friends with a J’naii called Soren as they work together to retrieve the J’naii shuttlecraft trapped in a pocket of “null space.” Over the course of a few days and several conversations about the role of gender in their societies, a romance develops. When Soren confesses her feelings to Riker, she also reveals to him that she identifies as female¹ — an admission that makes her the titular “outcast” in her society. Evidently, evolution does not bring enlightenment with regard to variations in sex and gender. Although the J’naii were once gendered, they now consider gender an illness to be treated. When Soren’s gender identity and her relationship with Riker are discovered by the J’naii, she is put on trial. Following an impassioned speech in which she confesses to being female, she is ordered to undergo “psychotectic” treatments — “a psychological treatment used [by the J’naii] to ‘treat’ or to

¹ Because Soren identifies as female, I refer to her using the feminine pronoun.

effectively eliminate gender-specific sexuality” (startrek.com). Similarly, Gethenians disapprove of those who maintain a particular sex and remain in kemmer permanently. While Gethenians discuss sexual practices quite openly, they are “reticent about discussing perversion” (67). Genly explains:

Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance towards the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormals — normals, by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual² societies. (67)

Thus, both works perform a reversal whereby the gendered characters — those who most closely resemble the average reader or viewer — are considered abnormal by the majority.

Wendy Gay Pearson describes *Left Hand* as “an interrogation of our current sex/gender system and its implications for the relations between women and men” (184). Le Guin conducts this interrogation through Genly’s perception of and gradual adjustment to the Gethenians’ androgyny and his related comments about males and females of his own race. As one of the first members of the Ekumen to come in contact with the Gethenians, Genly has difficulty coming to terms with the biological and social androgyny of his hosts. Genly’s struggle arises primarily because he was raised in a society like ours, which is preoccupied with fairly strict sex and gender binaries in spite of what is known about the multitude of variations on biological sex, the social construction of gender and gender roles, and the problematic conflation of biological sex with gender identity. Genly’s confusion is shared by Ong Tot Oppong, an investigator of the first Ekumenical landing party whose field notes make up Chapter Seven. Ong Tot writes:

When you meet a Gethenian you cannot and must not do what a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast him in the role of Man or Woman, while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent upon your expectations of the patterned or possible interactions between persons of the same or the

² It should be noted that Genly refers to “bisexuals” in the anatomical sense, not in relation to sexual orientation.

opposite sex. [...] They do not see one another as men or women. [...] Yet you cannot think of a Gethenian as 'it.' They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals. (100-101)

Although Ong Tot presents a fairly objective account of Gethenian sexual practices, her bias and resultant "othering" of the Gethenians are suggested early in the entry when she speculates as to why Gethenians are androgynous. She theorizes that they are the result of an experiment conducted by "the Colonizers" (95). She can think of no other reasonable explanation:

"Accident, possibly; natural selection, hardly. Their ambisexuality has no adaptive value" (95).

This opinion, scientific as it may be (though it ignores the fact that not all evolutionary features are adaptations), implies that Gethenians and androgyny are not natural in any context. That Gethenians might have evolved over time without interference to become androgynous is not even a consideration, which is odd when one considers that any records of Hainish colonization are lost to history. Le Guin reinforces Ong Tot's theory by mentioning that Gethenians are the only androgynous species and the only mammals on their planet. While they are traveling together, Genly says to Estraven:

Your race is appallingly alone in its world. No other mammalian species. No other ambisexual species. No animal intelligent enough even to domesticate as pets. It must color your thinking, this uniqueness [...] to be so solitary, in so hostile a world: it must affect your entire outlook. (251)

Conversely, Genly comes from a planet like Earth where countless species reproduce by similar means. Ironically, it is Genly who is truly alone and unique on Gethen, given that he is the only Hainish person on the planet. His difference and isolation colour his thinking and affect his outlook on Gethen and its inhabitants.

Genly has difficulty perceiving Gethenians without placing upon them his own gender stereotypes based on their personalities, behaviours, and physical appearance. He writes:

Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a

woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (12)

Genly's understanding of and dependence upon the "categories" (male/masculine and female/feminine) reflect his socialization in a fairly strict bisexual society. As Annas explains, "His problems with the inhabitants of Winter come from his inability to judge them as human beings without first defining them as men or women" (151). When he resorts to using his own conceptions of masculinity and femininity to describe the Gethenians, Genly's discomfort with androgyny is revealed, as is his sexism toward women. If one assumes Genly is writing in a language that, like English, has a gender neutral third person pronoun considered impersonal and offensive when applied to people, he opts to refer to all Gethenians by the masculine pronoun (5), as does Ong Tot (101), and the head of state is referred to as the king. Le Guin received criticism for this decision. Some felt she should have used an invented neutral pronoun rather than "translating" to the masculine English pronoun. As Rashley explains, "[Genly's] tendency to see androgynous characters as primarily male, and his use of masculine pronouns to represent them in the narrative, tends to affect the reader's interpretation of those characters" (23). Le Guin addressed such criticism in several essays, including "Is Gender Necessary?" in 1976 and a follow-up, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," in 1987. In the original essay she defends her use of the masculine pronoun, but concedes that coupled with a failure to present Estraven performing "female" tasks, it produces "a real flaw in the book" (15). In the updated essay, Le Guin amends her thoughts on the pronoun issue and, perhaps because of her stated dislike of invented pronouns, advocates that English grammar revert to they/them/their as a generic singular pronoun because he/him/his "does in fact exclude women from discourse" (15). Regardless of how masculine or feminine Genly perceives individual Gethenians to be, he consistently uses masculine pronouns to refer to everyone.

In spite of his pronoun selection, Genly uses his society's (or his personal) stereotypes about the sexes when describing individual Gethenians. In so doing, he associates negative traits with femininity. For example, his distrust of Estraven is rooted in the Gethenian's "effeminate intrigue" (8) and "effeminate deviousness" (15). He also perceives the person from whom he rents accommodations as female: "My landlady, a voluble man, arranged my journey into the

East. [...] I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (49-50). Evidence of Genly’s sexism toward women and effeminate men may be most derogatory when he writes of his experience while imprisoned at Pulefen Farm. In jail, the Gethenian prisoners are given drugs to prevent them from entering kemmer, which has deleterious effects over time. In describing his fellow prisoners, Genly writes, “Among my fellow-prisoners I had also for the first time on Winter a certain feeling of being a man among women, or among eunuchs. [...] They were as sexless as steers” (189-190). This analogy is problematic because both eunuchs and steers are born biologically male and then castrated, whereas the Gethenians are androgynous from birth and are not sterile. Steers have no potential, but the drugged Gethenians still do (assuming they can go through kemmer once again after the effects of the drugs wear off). Interestingly, Genly’s perception of the Gethenians at Pulefen as effeminate is not reserved for the prisoners. The guards, too, are described as physically feminine. He proceeds with his cattle metaphor, writing: “They tended to be stolid, slovenly, heavy and to my eyes effeminate — not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge” (189).

Later, he makes another analogy to a farm animal. While trekking across the ice with Estraven, Genly writes: “I was galled by [Estraven’s] patronizing. He was a head shorter than I, and built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle; when we hauled together I had to shorten my pace to his, hold in my strength so as not to out-pull him: a stallion in harness with a mule” (235). Not only does he draw a comparison between the strength of men relative to women, he likens himself to a stallion — an uncastrated male horse — and Estraven to a mule — the sterile offspring of a donkey and a horse. This draws a distinction regarding not just strength, but also fertility. Genly has been on the planet long enough to know that Gethenians are not neuter; therefore, his use of this particular analogy indicates a persistent, although perhaps subconscious, bias that diminishes Gethenian sexuality. Drawing a comparison here is not problematic in and of itself. The horse and mule metaphor is quite apt given the hauling task they are undertaking. However, *Left Hand* is a text where sex, gender, and the lack thereof play an important role. Because the statement comes from a character who has demonstrated

misunderstanding regarding the Gethenian variety of androgyny, the contrast becomes problematic, as it is difficult to ignore the reproductive differences between the two animals.

Estraven draws similar comparison. As he writes in his diary:

There is a frailty about him. He is all unprotected, exposed, vulnerable, even to his sexual organ, which he must carry always outside himself; but he is strong, unbelievably strong. I am not sure he can keep hauling any longer than I can, but he can haul harder and faster than I — twice as hard. [...] This slow, hard, crawling work we have been doing these days wears him out in body and will, so that if he were of my race I should think him a coward, but he is anything but that; he has a ready bravery I have never seen the like of. He is ready, eager, to stake life on the cruel quick test of the precipice. (245-46)

Estraven's criticism of Genly's frailty and vulnerability is qualified with three "but"s followed by compliments about his strength and bravery, whereas Genly's tone is more consistently critical.

However, Genly is sufficiently self-critical to make these observations in retrospect. He writes:

On the other hand, if he could lower his standards of shifgrethor, as I realized he had done with me, perhaps I could dispense with the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect, which he certainly understood as little as I understood shifgrethor. (235)

Genly recognizes his error not by correcting the analogy (because it is not wholly flawed), but by adjusting his standards.

The Gethenians are not presented as being any more or less enlightened than Genly is with respect to sex and gender. Likewise, Ong Tot's experimentation theory is mere speculation. No one can recall a time when Gethenians were bisexual nor any historical connection they might have to bisexual species. There are variations on the "normal" Gethenian, several of which are found in the group of Foretellers at Otherhord, including Celibates and Perverts (66). They think people "permanently in kemmer" are "disgusting" (38). They have been androgynous for as long as history can recall; if they evolved to be androgynous, it was such a long time ago that this evolution is not part of their recorded history. Just as Genly does, the Gethenians have a concept of what is "normal" in terms of sexual expression.

The Gethenians' discomfort with permanent gender raises a point of ambiguity, as is often the case in Le Guin's ostensible utopias. This apparent Gethenian bigotry is coupled with Genly's prominent voice in the text (he narrates ten of the book's twenty chapters), which highlights his discomfort with both the androgynous Gethenians and with women. As a result, a progressive perspective on gender is not clearly presented. This seems an odd approach if Le Guin's aim is to promote a degree of equality between the sexes. Russ writes:

Miss LeGuin seems to be aiming at some kind of equality between the sexes, but she certainly goes the long way around to get it; a whole new biology has to be invented, a whole society, a whole imagined world, so that finally she may bring together two persons of different sexes who will nonetheless be equals. (91)

Though she calls *Left Hand* "a beautifully written book," Russ takes issue with Le Guin's use of a male observer as narrator and also with her failure to represent Gethenian family structure and child-rearing (89-90). Russ also asserts that Estraven, the secondary narrator, is male — "at least 'he' is *masculine in gender, if not in sex*" (emphasis in original) — and that these factors reduce Gethen to "a world of men" (90). Stanislaw Lem, too, argues that Le Guin's presentation of the Gethenians is overly masculine. He takes issue with Gethenian wardrobe and behaviour:

"because Karhider garments, manners of speech, mores and behaviour are masculine. In the social realm, the male element has remained victorious over the female" (cited in Tillack).³

While many critics agree that *Left Hand* is a male-dominated text, a particular scene does suggest a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality. This pivotal moment in Genly's relationship with Estraven and his understanding of androgyny comes during their journey across the ice to Karhide when Estraven goes into kemmer, presumably assuming female sex traits due to Genly's presence. The experience is presented from the perspective of both narrators in their respective chapters. When Estraven is (physically) female, Genly is first struck by his friend's

³ Like the Gethenians, the wardrobe and appearance of the J'naii make androgyny appear more like masculinity. The J'naii wear jumpsuits (not unlike the Federation uniforms) in earth-tones and have short haircuts that make them resemble young boys. However, the episode did not elicit as much criticism in this regard as did *Left Hand*, perhaps because the J'naii were portrayed by female actors.

associated feminine features and writes, “His face in the reddish light was as soft, as vulnerable, as remote as the face of a woman who looks at you out of her thoughts and does not speak” (266), but he goes on to have an important revelation regarding Estraven’s gender:

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. [...] I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man. (266-267)

The subtext of this scene in the tent can suggest that the two have a sexual encounter. Neither narrator conveys the point explicitly. Genly writes:

I expect it will turn out that sexual intercourse is possible between Gethenian double-sexed and Hainishnorm one-sexed human beings, though such intercourse will inevitably be sterile. It remains to be proved; Estraven and I proved nothing except perhaps a rather subtler point. (265-66)

While the encounter may not have included intercourse — or Genly does not reveal in his official record if it did — he does write explicitly of the “sexual tension” (267) and “profound love” (268) between them. I would argue that the fear Genly speaks of is his own internalized homophobia with which he would have been struggling if he found himself attracted to Estraven whom he perceives as predominantly male.

In addition to this realization, there is a shift in Genly’s perspective to the point where he feels his own people, or at least the women of his species, are more alien to him than the Gethenians. They have a conversation during which Estraven asks Genly about the differences between men and women — differences which Genly struggles to articulate. Genly recalls “being very hard put to it to answer coherently when he asked me what women were like” (267). Estraven recounts the conversation in more detail. When asked whether women are a different species, Genly responds, “No. Yes. No, of course not, not really. But the difference is very important” (252), and goes on to speak about societal expectations, generalizations based on sex, and equality or the lack thereof. As he tries to describe women to Estraven, Genly says, “In a

sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow” (253). In spite of his moment of identification with the Gethenian race and his revelation about Estraven, Genly does not entirely escape the trappings of the gender binary. In the book’s final pages, he writes, “In an hour or so the boy (he had a girl’s quick delicacy in his looks and movements, but no girl could keep so grim a silence as he did) came to tell me that the Lord of Estre would receive me” (321). Once again, Genly ascribes gender to an androgynous person based on physical appearance and mannerisms, conveying the extent to which gender norms are engrained in those socialized in a bisexual society.

Like *Left Hand*, “The Outcast” is an interrogation of our current sex/gender system with an emphasis on discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The episode was created in response to the growing demand from fans that queer lives be represented in the *Star Trek* universe, particularly in light of the original series’ reputation for breaking the boundaries of gender and race on television (Kay). In his 2001 article for *Salon*, Jonathan Kay discusses in detail the history of queer content, or the lack thereof, in *Star Trek*. He devotes a portion of his article to “The Outcast” and the response from fans after the episode aired on 14 March 1992. Kay recounts the complaints from fans and actor Jonathan Frakes, who played Riker, that the episode was not “gutsy” enough, and from others who felt the episode promoted a conservative agenda. The episode’s lack of “guts” is a symptom of gendering Soren and giving her a female heterosexual identity in a story meant to address the issues facing homosexuals in America.

The parallels between the J’naii and contemporary American homosexuals are clear from Soren’s “coming out” speech to Riker at the episode’s mid-point:

Occasionally, among my people, there are a few who are born different — who are throwbacks to the era when we all had gender. Some have strong inclinations to maleness and some have urges to be female. I am one of the latter. [...] I must be careful not to reveal myself [because] on our world, these feelings are forbidden. [...] Those of us who have these urges live secret and guarded lives. We seek each other out, always hiding, always terrified of being discovered.

Like members of the American queer community in the early 1990s, Soren is a member of a non-visible sexual minority that is not socially accepted among her people. She and other gendered J'naii are verbally taunted, physically assaulted, and considered by others to be ill. As a result, they keep their identities secret and meet clandestinely with others like them, and “come out” to individuals whom they trust, as Soren does Riker. When it is unsafe to identify publicly as gay, underground networks often spring up, much as gendered J'naii form a secret community. When she reveals her gender identity to Riker, Soren explains the risk she takes in doing so by recalling a classmate who was rumoured to identify as male and was teased and beaten by other children. During her courtroom speech, Soren speaks of the commonalities between androgynous and gendered individuals in much the same way queer activists endeavour to dispel the perceived differences between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Without using the precise words, the theme of Soren’s speech is “love is love,” a popular gay rights slogan. Just as the Gethenians do not approve of “perverts” who maintain a particular physical sex, the J'naii disapprove of those who have a gender identity.

In an earlier conversation, Soren explains that the J'naii once had two sexes, but that they have “evolved into a higher form” and now consider gender to be “primitive.” She tells Riker how this belief manifests itself and what happened to her male-identified classmate: “Those who are discovered are shamed and ridiculed, and only by undergoing psychotectic therapy and having all elements of gender eliminated can they be accepted into society again.” Until 1973 the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic Statistic Manual classified homosexuality as a disorder, and shock therapy and other types of “conversion therapy” are still used by some groups, such as conservative religious organizations, in an effort to “cure” individuals of their homosexuality. The J'naii psychotectic treatments and pathologizing of gender is a clear reference to this human practice, although the episode makes no reference to homosexuality or gender variance among humans either historically or in the context of the series.

According to Kay, “many gay viewers wondered why [executive producer Rick] Berman felt the need to slink around in allegory,” but such criticism is easily answered. The use of metaphor and allegory to put a twist on familiar subject matter is common in *Star Trek* and in science fiction more generally. In the case of *Star Trek*, it is particularly familiar in what are

known as “issue episodes” aimed at addressing a hot topic in real-world current affairs and politics. “The Outcast” is an episode designed to make a statement about discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, so criticizing the show’s use of allegory is not enough on its own to dismiss the impact of the episode.

Yet, the episode’s issues go deeper than its method of storytelling. On one level, the reversal is clever (and not unlike Le Guin’s race reversal in *Four Ways to Forgiveness* wherein light-skinned people are enslaved by a group of darker-skinned people), as it points out the absurdity of discriminating against homosexuals by depicting the punishment of Soren for being heterosexual, but on another level the cleverness is undercut by the script’s failure to make reference to the historical treatment of sexual minorities. Instead, the only discrimination in human history that is mentioned is that of women. It is Soren’s female identity that is of concern to her people; her relationship with Riker is a symptom of her illness.

In their response to the episode after it originally aired, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) wrote, “While there were elements to praise, no mention was made of gays or lesbians in the future or about anti-gay discrimination in Earth’s past.” This is true; although *Star Trek* often mentions non-fictional events from Earth’s history, the only reference to historical discrimination on Earth comes when Dr. Crusher, one of the series’ two regular female characters, tells Soren, “In the past, women were often considered weak and inferior, but that hasn’t been true for a long time.” She does not mention the discrimination against sexual minorities and transgender people and, thus, does not say whether such discrimination has come to an end by the twenty-fourth century.

This conversation between Soren and Crusher is perhaps the most unsatisfactory in the dialogue-driven episode. Although Crusher, as a doctor, is in a position to explain to Soren the variety in human anatomy, sexuality, and gender identity, their discussion does not extend much beyond generalizations about physical appearance, particularly what men and women do in an effort to appear attractive to members of the opposite sex. The same issue arises in Soren’s conversations with Riker. Soren is very inquisitive about “what it is like” to have gender and how the two genders differ from and interact with one another, especially romantically. That the episode is primarily a love story helps to explain the excessive talk of sexual organs and

reproduction, but Riker and Crusher both fail to tell Soren that gender and biological sex are not as simple as a male-female binary and that not all sexual relationships are heterosexual. Not only do the conversations center on the male-female binary and consider heterosexual relations exclusively, they also reenforce a traditional image of monogamous relationships. Crusher and Riker's failure to acknowledge the existence of homosexuality, intersexed and transgender people, and polyamory leaves open the question from fans as to whether queer people exist in the *Star Trek* universe. Instead, when Soren's female identity and corresponding attraction to Riker are revealed, the episode tells a heterosexual love story.

If Crusher is the representative female of the episode, Lieutenant Worf represents males at their most stereotypically masculine. The two provide polarized examples of their respective sexes. Crusher is decidedly feminine though she works in a quite masculinized field, at least by twentieth century standards; she nearly always wears her hair long and down and, as Soren puts it, she "applies colour" to her face. By comparison, Klingon males are "hypermasculine" by human standards and Worf is a sexist. For example, while playing poker with his crewmates he claims that a game with many wild cards "supports a weak hand," making it a "woman's game." Notably, he holds the minority view at the poker table. The audience is meant to deem Worf's opinions as regressive even by twentieth century standards. However, when Crusher explains stereotypical femininity to Soren, she does so without resorting to sexist overtones or undertones, suggesting that these stereotypes should be regarded as somehow authoritative if it is how we are to explain gender to a genderless species, and implying that gender discrimination is what is of concern in "The Outcast."

The flaws in "The Outcast" which generate confusion over what the issue truly is in this "issue episode" can, in part, be attributed to the dual nature of Soren's transgression. There are a number of ways scriptwriter Jeri Taylor might have addressed the "gay issue." A simple reversal would have been to present the J'naii as a male-female society where homosexuality is the dominant sexual orientation, and for Soren, a female, to be punished for her heterosexual attraction to Riker. Another possibility would be for Soren to be an androgyne among androgynes who is punished for her heterosexuality. This would have the added impact of Riker's attraction to a non-female. However, Taylor takes Soren's divergence from the J'naii

norm a step further by making the J'naii androgynous and giving Soren a gender. The option which might be deemed the most “gutsy” and also the most explicit, would have been for Soren to identify as male rather than female, or to at least appear more masculine by human standards, and for Riker to be attracted to Soren regardless. Instead, Soren is presented as both female and heterosexual, simplifying her romantic relationship with Riker, especially insofar as Riker’s status as an established heterosexual male is maintained.

The two-fold revelation of Soren’s gender identity and sexual orientation within the same scene suggest that the two aspects of Soren’s identity are closely linked. Bloggers Kathleen Moran and Joe Sartelle take issue with the coupling of Soren’s gender identity with her sexual orientation. They write:

[...] the story completely confuses any distinction between biological gender and sexual preference. Soren thinks she’s a girl inside, which *of course* means that she wants to be with a boy [...] ‘Liberation’ for her means the right to be heterosexual. By making gender equate with sexual preference, and making androgyny a weird and uncanny exception to the universal rule of male and female, the episode implied that heterosexuality is just as natural and universal as the difference between male and female.

This conflation of Soren’s heterosexuality with her female gender identity is reenforced in the final scene between Soren and Riker. According to GLAAD, “Many found the conclusion ambiguous and disturbing.” The Prime Directive — the Federation of Planets’ policy of non-interference in the internal matters of alien civilizations — prevents Riker from putting up much of a fight in defence of Soren, and his covert rescue mission is thwarted when Soren is given psychotectic treatments in advance of his arrival. When Soren is stripped of her female identity, she is no longer attracted to Riker. Absent any explanation for why this happened, the implication is that Soren’s heterosexuality was predicated on her gender identity. For Elspeth Kydd, “the episode resolved unsatisfactorily” because Soren’s psychotectic treatment “terminates any romantic possibilities between Riker and Soren.” Kydd is right to point out that the abrupt end to their relationship is largely a symptom of how serialized television functions with regard to romantic storylines. Nonetheless, it is troubling that when Soren is made to feel androgynous,

her romantic feelings toward Riker are “cured,” as well, once again conflating her gender identity with her sexual orientation.

Worf’s apparent change of heart toward the J’naii is also made problematic by Soren’s gender. During the poker game with other crew members, Worf expresses discomfort toward the J’naii because they are “all the same” and suggests that a romantic relationship between a human and a J’naii would be “impossible.” When Lieutenant Commander Data and Counselor Deanna Troi press him on the issue, he cannot give an answer for why he feels this way. Romantic relationships between Klingons and humans are represented in *Star Trek* and Worf is not opposed to such unions; his former lover K’Ehleyr was of Klingon-human parentage and in a later season, Worf has a romance with Troi, who is half human-half Betazoid. In the episode’s final act, he offers to accompany Riker on the aforementioned rescue mission to the planet’s surface saying, “A warrior does not let a friend face danger alone.” Given this somewhat vague explanation, there are several possible readings of Worf’s actions. It might simply be explained by the Klingon’s love of adventure and combat, or his devotion to Riker as a friend and commanding officer. However, Worf’s willingness to fight literally for Riker and Soren’s relationship so soon after his comments at the poker table suggests Worf’s perspective on the union has changed in one of two ways. The move could be interpreted as Worf changing his opinion upon reflection, but it might also be read as Worf supporting Riker only once Soren’s female identity is revealed and their relationship is deemed heterosexual. Worf does mention that he is “aware of what transpired on the planet’s surface,” so he knows that Soren is being punished for identifying as female. Again, the question remains as to how the situation would differ if Soren were simply androgynous and she and Riker pursued a relationship. Because Soren is gendered, Worf’s decision to help Riker save Soren is not a clear instance of progressive thinking on his part.

Two crucial and potentially redeeming features of the episode are that, other than Worf, the crew members do not express any particular discomfort with J’naii androgyny nor with Riker’s relationship with Soren even when they think she is androgynous. When Soren is led out of the courtroom, the judge explains that everyone on J’naii wants to be normal. In response, Riker insists that contrary to J’naii beliefs, Soren is normal. One could read this line as an insistence that heterosexuality and fitting into a male-female gender binary are normal to the

exclusion of other identities. However, Frakes' delivery of this line ("She *is!*" as opposed to "*She is!*") does not suggest Riker thinks Soren is normal while the androgynous people are not. Rather, he is defending the normality of departure from social customs and variety in human nature, not the normality of heterosexuality. In addition, Riker is sensitive to his use of pronouns when he conveys this semantic difficulty to Soren after she corrects his use of "he" in reference to one of Soren's colleagues. Unlike Genly's narration in *Left Hand*, "The Outcast" does not perpetuate the pronoun issue thanks to the predominant use of dialogue in drama. Aside from Riker and Soren's discussion of pronouns, the script avoids referring to any of the J'naii using pronouns until Soren's female identity is revealed and Riker refers to her as "she" in the courtroom. Even in his conversation with Troi after Soren comes out to him, Riker does not refer to Soren using a pronoun. He does not "out" Soren to Troi, and Troi accepts Riker's feelings for Soren regardless of Soren's supposed androgyny. Most likely, these rather subtle expressions of acceptance are the intended "take away" message of the episode.

Metaphor and allegory are common tactics in science fiction, but these two works suggest an inherent difficulty in using androgyny to convey a message about either sexual orientation or gender, perhaps because the gender binary is so engrained in our culture. While both works set out to challenge hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality, they undermine their efforts by reinforcing a heterosexual norm and a male-female gender binary. Male attraction to an androgyne challenges the dominant heterosexual norm, but that challenge is undermined when the respective androgynes assume the sex traits of or identify as a female, eliciting a sense of relief on the part of the heterosexual male and allowing him to cast aside any internalized homophobia or questioning of his sexual identity.

While *Left Hand* sets out to challenge the male-female dichotomy, Genly's strict conceptions of gender roles and behaviours muddle the message. His relationship with Estraven challenges his heterosexuality, but this challenge, too, is limited because Genly's revelation about the "profound love" and "sexual tension" between him and Estraven comes when Estraven assumes female sexual characteristics during kemmer. The saving grace may be that through it all, Estraven identifies as androgynous even during kemmer and Genly's revelation suggests that he sees Estraven as equally male and female. Conversely, "The Outcast" sets out to challenge

discrimination based on sexual orientation, but in actuality raises questions about binary gender roles and a seemingly clever allegory serves to reenforce heterosexuality for the most part.

Unlike Estraven, Soren identifies as female, reenforcing Riker's heterosexuality; and once she is treated, she is also no longer attracted to Riker — her heterosexual orientation was bound up in her female identity. While Soren identifies as a particular gender and wants Riker to perceive her that way, Estraven's female qualities are purely biological, are temporary, and could just as easily be his male qualities during his next kemmer. If Gethenians did not possess both male and female reproductive organs and if Soren did not identify as female, *Left Hand* and "The Outcast" would serve as more convincing challenges to gender roles and heteronormativity.

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